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DEMOCRATIC DECENTRALIZATION IN MALI: A Work in Progress

Mali has launched a bold experiment in democratic decentralization filled with great promise and major challenges. Malians are eager to take charge of their future, but scarce resources and unresolved questions about new government functions and responsibilities could hinder progress.

SUMMARY

For Mali, democratic decentralization is a matter of political survival. After a popular revolt in 1991 and rebellion in the north, leaders made a commitment to give localities more autonomy. The Mission for Decentralization, the agency established to design and implement decentralization, has accomplished much. It has developed a viable legal and institutional framework and its effort to promote public understanding and involvement in decentralization has achieved remarkable results. People throughout Mali, for example, have played an integral part in organizing their new local government units.

USAID/Mali has been laying the groundwork for decentralization since the 1980s, promoting economic liberalization, increased food security, and local health care programs. Since 1991, the Mission has supported the government's decentralization initiative by providing assistance to regional and local study groups and for mobilizing local resources.

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Before decentralization becomes a reality, however, Malians will have to resolve some tough political issues and overcome some historical and cultural factors. Chief among them is a scarcity of resources, bureaucratic resistance, and popular attitudes and expectations. Land use issues will be difficult to resolve, as will the relationships between levels of government and of traditional leaders and elected officials.

INTRODUCTION

Seemingly everywhere in Mali, colorful posters in public buildings, businesses, and stores advertise the government program to shift authority and responsibility to the local level. The poster has a monthly calendar for 1997, the year local governing bodies were scheduled to be first elected. It features drawings of a fisherman, farmer, herder, and woman—the mainstays of economic and social life. At the top is a message of support¹ from the Mission for Decentralization to the communes, Mali's newly constituted local government units.

The poster symbolizes Mali's commitment to bring democratic governance to the local level. This commitment is rooted in a series of momentous events, starting with the popular revolt and military coup that overthrew the dictatorship of President Moussa Traore in March 1991. Later that year, 1,800 delegates

¹ “*Bon vent aux communes!*” In English, “good luck to the communes” (literally, “a good wind for the communes”).

² Although the constitution was approved by more than 99 percent of those voting, only 43 percent of the electorate participated. The constitution went into effect February 25, 1992.

³ Deconcentration involves delegating power to regional and local authorities, while maintaining central government hierarchy. With decentralization, the national government devolves authority, including fiscal autonomy, in areas such as health, education, and agriculture, maintaining only a supervisory role.

from all regions, ethnic groups, and most major civil society groups met in a landmark national conference. The conference produced a draft constitution making Mali a multiparty democracy with a decentralized government. The constitution was approved by referendum in January 1992.² The constitution, together with the June 1992 election of President Alpha Oumar Konare and municipal authorities in 19 existing self-governing urban communes, firmly established the foundation for the subsequent decentralization initiative.

The poster's drawings capture the spirit of participation of the current decentralization effort. The government has reached out to the people directly, creating an unprecedented dialog. This holds promise for change in what has long been a mutually mistrustful relationship between government and governed.

HISTORICAL AND POLITICAL CONTEXT

Mali's present decentralization effort reflects the country's history and recent political past. Perhaps most significant is the complex relationship between government and governed developed over more than 1,200 years. From the first Sahelian empire (A.D. 700) through French colonial rule (1880–1960) and the post-independence First and Second republics, authoritarian rulers have been exploitive and local leaders have sought to evade central authority. State administrations controlled peasants and villagers, extracting taxes and conscripting labor, while providing some services. Local authorities struggled to retain some autonomy and, particularly, evade state taxation.

In the First Republic (1960–1968) the government tried to devolve administrative responsibility to the localities, but it became an exercise in deconcentration.³ For example, the government replaced local administrators the French

used to tax, conscript, and impose colonial rule with an elite group from the capital, Bamako. This new group was loyal to the central government and its administrative hierarchy, not to the local communities where they were assigned. Thus, the new policy increased the distance between the government and the people. Previous administrators had at least some legitimacy in the eyes of the people because they came from the areas where they served.

Under the Second Republic (1968–1991), the government instituted nominal decentralization-related administrative and territorial reforms. It defined 19 urban communes and 7 regions and established local and regional development committees. These reforms, however, were implemented unevenly at best and ineffectively at worst, testament to the military government's increasingly autocratic and corrupt rule.

By the time of the present Third Republic, decentralization was an overused, empty term. Yet events in the north brought it back into prominence in the early 1990s, when the government became embroiled in armed conflict with Tuareg and Moor rebels seeking autonomy. Facing a possible split in the country, the government tried to negotiate a ceasefire, offering the rebels a decentralized administrative system with political and fiscal autonomy for "territorial collectivities." The resultant April 1994 peace agreement, the National Pact, included special provisions for governance of the north.

Necessity was the mother of invention. Fearing it would lose complete control of the north, the government compromised by offering autonomy to all regions. Current leaders are fully committed to decentralization because most believe Mali would be ungovernable without it.

THE STUDY

In January 1997 a CDIE team spent three weeks in Mali evaluating donor efforts to promote democratic decentralization. This case study is the last of five assessments, which also covered Bolivia, Honduras, the Philippines, and Ukraine. Mali was selected both to round out the mix of countries, by including one from Africa, and because of the government's unique, five-year effort to decentralize.

The overall assessment is an outgrowth of USAID's emphasis on democracy and governance programming and its desire to systematically examine results in this new area. The findings will be synthesized in a report laying out an analytical framework for future donor programming in democratic local governance.

The team consisted of a CDIE evaluation specialist experienced in assessing USAID democracy and governance programs, two USAID anthropologists—one from the Global Bureau, Office of Women in Development, the other from the Agency's Africa Bureau—with extensive experience in Mali and expertise in local governance issues, and a political scientist specializing in Francophone Africa. In-country, the team was joined by a local development anthropologist with expertise on rural Mali and public policy.

The assessment explored several questions:

- What are the essential elements and current status of Mali's program to decentralize government authority and responsibility?
- How has decentralization worked in the 19 urban communes and what might this portend for its implementation nationwide?
- What role have USAID and other donors played in supporting decentralization?

■ What lessons can be applied to promote democratic decentralization elsewhere?

The team conducted interviews, examined documents, and traveled widely to assess Malian and donor-supported decentralization efforts. The team met with national, regional, and local government representatives, including decentralization mission and ministry officials, deputies of the National Assembly, mayors, and village chiefs. The team also met with leaders and members of local citizen groups and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and with representatives of local businesses and the media.

USAID Mission and U.S. Embassy staff, officials of the United Nations Development Program, World Bank, and the European Union and a number of bilateral donors also provided information. The team talked with staff of international private voluntary organizations (PVOs) and contractors carrying out donor-sponsored activities. Finally, the team was informed by a half-day seminar organized for its benefit, where a panel of Malian experts discussed the status of and prospects for the government's decentralization program.

Traveling outside Bamako, the team examined decentralization efforts in four of the country's eight regional administrative divisions. The team visited cities such as Gao (in the north), Sikasso (in the south), Kayes (in the west), and Mopti (in the center). The aim was to learn how municipal governments were functioning under elected mayors for the first time, and what implications this might have for decentralization. The team also visited rural towns with 10,000 people or fewer (Djenne and Douenza, between Mopti and Gao; and Kita in the Kayes region) and villages with as few as 300 people (Karnaka, near Mopti; Kokele and Koumountou, not far from Sikasso; Safe-bougoula and Maniaga, near Bamako; and Keniekenieko and Kenieba-Bafing near Kayes). Research there examined people's knowledge and expectations of the newly created local gov-

ernments and their participation in the redistributing process that led to their establishment.

THE ROLE OF THE MISSION FOR DECENTRALIZATION

Rooted in the National Conference and the new constitution, the decentralization initiative formally began with a January 1993 decree creating the Mission for Decentralization.⁴ The mission has been the driving force behind decentralization, with responsibilities including:

- drafting necessary legislation (subject to approval by the National Assembly)
- informing people about decentralization and involving them as much as possible
- working with local governments and villages on reorganizing themselves into communes
- preparing for the transfer of authority from the national to the local level
- training citizens, local leaders, and government officials

The New Government Structure

By the time CDIE visited, much had been accomplished under the decentralization mission's direction. Three key laws, enacted in February 1993 and April and May 1995, set forth the legal and structural framework of the proposed government. The 1993 law outlines rights and responsibilities of the autonomous subnational units ("territorial collectivities"). These include urban and rural communes (mu-

⁴ In French, *Mission de Decentralisation*. A mission is an organization created to complete a task and then be dissolved.

municipalities), *cercles* (counties), and regions.⁵ The collectivities are autonomous and are to be governed by elected assemblies or councils, with supervision by state representatives. They will also be financially autonomous. They can levy taxes, take in other revenue, and borrow or receive money from outside groups, such as NGOs and donors.

The Code of the Territorial Collectivities, establishes the subnational units' jurisdiction and governing bodies. The communes, cercles, and regions will have extensive authority in designated areas, including education, health, infrastructure, and development (see box).

The code establishes councils as governing bodies for communes. Councils will have 11 to 45 members (depending on the commune's size), elected by universal suffrage and proportional representation. Each council will choose a mayor and commune executive from its ranks. Cercle councils will have representatives selected by the commune councils in their territory. Depending on its size, each commune will have two to five representatives on the cercle council. The cercle council will choose a president and two vice presidents from among the members to manage its activities. The regional governing body will be an assembly, with representatives chosen by each cercle council in its borders. Depending on their size, cercle councils will have two to four assembly representatives. The assemblies are to be headed by a president and two vice presidents selected from

⁵ Under existing government structure there are 270 local government units (*arrondissements*), 52 cercles or counties, and 8 regions. The key organizational difference in the proposed structure is the creation of 701 rural and urban communes to replace *arrondissements*.

⁶ Planned legislation will establish a High Council of Collectivities to represent the new communes, cercles, and regions at the national level. It will be a subordinate second chamber of the National Assembly, with power to introduce legislation. Other outstanding legislative issues include establishing the legal basis for changing commune boundaries and specifying the national government's and collectivities' areas of administrative responsibility.

Box 1: Territorial Collectivities' Responsibilities

Communes

1. Preschool, primary school, and literacy teachers
2. Health workers and facilities
3. Transportation, roads, and communication
4. Urban and rural waterworks
5. Local markets, sports, and cultural events

Cercles

1. Secondary schools
2. Health facilities
3. Roads and communications
4. Rural waterworks

Regions

1. Secondary, technical, and professional schools, and special education
2. Regional hospitals, support of "vulnerable" populations
3. Roads, communication, and energy
4. Organization of rural production
5. Artisan and tourism activities

among its members. All these posts are for a single five-year term. Votes for president and vice president, except those of commune council members, are to be secret.

The third law defines the role of state representatives at the territorial level. At the regional level, a high commissioner, appointed with approval of the Council of Ministers, will serve with a three-member cabinet. At the cercle and commune levels the minister of territorial affairs will appoint state representatives. These state appointees will represent the national interest in the communes, cercles, and regions, monitoring the application of laws, rules, and decisions of the central government.⁶

Getting the Word Out

More important than establishing the government's legal and structural framework is the decentralization mission's effort to inform Malians about decentralization and help them become stakeholders in it. To get the ball rolling, the mission created Regional and Local Study and Mobilization groups in late 1993.⁷ Throughout the country, the regional and local groups organized public meetings and information campaigns to explain the government's decentralization plan and solicit the people's input in its implementation.

Building on this successful public education effort, in April 1995 the decentralization mission began involving people in determining the composition and government seat of each commune. Here, too, in arguably the country's first attempt at combining democratization and decentralization, the regional and local study and mobilization groups played a key role.

The experience in the Kayes region is illustrative. There, a medical doctor appointed to direct the regional study group was joined by 43 other religious, ethnic, and professional leaders. The group first held a four-day seminar and workshop to establish guidelines for redistricting. The regional representatives then split up to develop and provide training for the local study groups at the cercle level. Next, meetings were held in each of the region's arrondissements. Representatives from every village were invited and the guidelines for establishing the communes—such as population requirements, geographic proximity, and economic viability—were explained. The local people were left to discuss their options and hold additional meetings as needed to reach decisions.

The process was successful, but not without difficulties. Many localities, for example, initially scoffed at the idea that the national government

was genuinely interested in their input and looked to the decentralization mission to resolve their disputes. Not surprisingly, among the most difficult issues was determining which village in a rural commune would be the site of the government seat.

CDIE also heard of a public hearing in the south where two young men shouted that their villages could never join together because of their centuries-old mutual enmity. An elder reprimanded them, asking pointedly, "Are you concerned with today's problems or yesterday's? Today, we need to figure out how to sell our produce, furnish our health clinics, and run schools for our children."

Initially apprehensive, decentralization mission officials realized with great relief that the present decentralization effort has important allies among the people. Over time, such incidents led the mission to view local groups as an asset rather than a potential disruption to decentralization.

THE DECENTRALIZATION EXPERIENCE

Mali's experience over the past five years has been a mixed bag of promising developments, obstacles and problems, and unanswered questions. Malians are increasingly aware of and interested in decentralization. And they have taken initiative in dealing with local matters over which they previously had little or no control. However, a number of problems have slowed progress or threatened to diminish results. Perhaps most significant are the scarcity of resources and bureaucratic resistance among central government ministries.

Promising Developments

Among the most promising developments are localities' innovative efforts to manage their own affairs, the growing involvement of community

⁷ *Groupes Regionaux d'Étude et de Mobilisation* and *Groupes Locaux d'Étude et de Mobilisation*.

groups, and a remarkable degree of public awareness and understanding of the decentralization program.

Informed Anticipation

The awareness and understanding of the decentralization program among citizens, particularly those in rural areas, was perhaps CDIE's most striking finding. For example, in an unannounced visit to Kamaka, a village of 300 inhabitants 25 miles from Mopti, CDIE met with a group of 18 men and 8 women. Most appeared familiar with decentralization (ostensibly because a local study and mobilization group visited the village in 1996), and several were knowledgeable and thoughtful. One explained that decentralization meant they would be able to govern themselves. Another, hopeful about decentralization, pointed to the fact that they could meet with us and speak their minds openly. Still another said past local government authorities had "not been good to them," but he thinks this will change under the new system.

Villagers elsewhere were similarly informed and thoughtful. An organizer of the village-run school in a community of several hundred people was asked what democracy meant to him. "It means I am my own master," he replied. In another village, a farmer who understood the economic effect of bad roads on market access was impatient for the time he and his neighbors would be able to help determine how their taxes would be spent. Both were sure that "home rule" is what they want and said they are encouraged by what they learned from the local study groups about the government's commitment to bring it about.

Also instructive is the optimism about local revenue generation among some central government officials and local people. In separate interviews, decentralization mission officials and villagers agreed that effective local tax collection is essential for local projects. CDIE heard repeatedly that villagers have long concealed taxable assets—land, crops, cattle—from state

collectors, although everyone has a fairly good idea of who owns what. But when Malians work together to achieve a valued collective good, cultural norms militate against free-loading. Because of this, they believe tax collection by the new locally elected governments will improve substantially.

Many of those CDIE interviewed also were aware of and thoughtful about what they will face under the commune governments. For example, in a tough-minded assessment of his village's limited means and big plans, a Safebougoula association member said:

You have to start somewhere. In any case, the new system will be better than the old. For years we villagers have been paying the government and asking only to get the road scraped smooth, in vain. Now, we will choose to use our funds for our own purposes.

Seizing the Initiative

In some urban communes and rural villages, local leaders have been working to gain control of their own affairs. In Sikasso, Mali's third largest city (population 80,000), the mayor has spearheaded an effort to mobilize public support for and involvement in a \$2 million project to pave 18 kilometers of streets. The resultant public-private partnership, consisting of municipal employees (including, most notably, tax collectors), business owners, and city residents, has raised more than \$180,000. This is a 400 percent increase over previous city tax revenues.

Work on the project began in January 1997. Gutters along a segment of the roadway were cleared and repaired and one of the main boulevards was graded. A contract has been awarded for the asphaltting and work is expected to recommence after the rainy season.

The mayor of Gao has shown similar initiative. He told CDIE that at the top of his list of decentralization priorities is changing peoples' negative attitude toward government and reducing

their aversion to civic involvement. To promote public participation and undermine the popular view that officeholders stop working once they're in power, he has taken part in public activities in unusual ways. During scheduled city clean-up days, for example, he has rolled up his sleeves and helped collect and remove refuse.

Many of his constituents say "he's crazy," he acknowledged good-naturedly. But he believes leaders have to practice what they preach if people are to change. Because of long-held attitudes, many find it equally "crazy" for the president to go to a village to ask people their ideas on government actions and programs, he added. Such actions, in conjunction with specific efforts (for example, advertising public meetings on local radio stations) to involve people in local government activities have increased interest and participation.

Village leaders have also acted in ways that would have been unthinkable in the past. For example, in a village near Mopti a local association manager embezzled \$3,800 (an enormous sum where annual per capita income is \$200–\$300). Reflecting a pattern of dependency and a cultural tradition of avoiding confrontation, leaders asked local NGO representatives to do something about it. The representatives declined, telling the villagers to pursue it and suggesting they might suspend operations in the area if the villagers didn't. The president of the local development committee then went to the cercle commandant and registered a complaint. The manager was arrested and imprisoned and has paid back more than \$2,600.

⁸ By registering with the government, organizations become legal entities under Mali's Law of Associations and can take advantage of certain tax and other benefits.

⁹ Economic interest groups exemplify the government's commitment to promote economic reform by supporting the privatization of services normally provided by public sector entities.

Increased Community Involvement

Over the past five years organizations operating locally have become much more active. Perhaps the most important reason is the explosive growth in organizations established since 1991. NGOs registered with the government have jumped from 50 to more than 600; 2,000 to 3,000 new village associations have been registered; and thousands of others have been established but not yet registered.⁸ They operate in diverse areas, including promoting economic growth and providing social services.

Some local organizations have used economic interest groups⁹ to support profit-making ventures that benefit the community, such as waste removal and garbage collection. In one small city CDIE visited, an NGO provided basic equipment, such as wheelbarrows, donkey carts, and implements to get the enterprise started. With support from neighborhood groups, the interest group contracted with households to deliver services for a small fee.

In the Sikasso region, CDIE sat in on the weekly meeting of the Djidia group, an NGO-supported women's credit association in the village of Koumountou. The main purpose was to collect scheduled payments from members with loans. About \$140 was collected, each payment painstakingly counted out loud by the treasurer and her aide. The president proudly pointed out that since the association was established in 1993, it has never failed to pay back the NGO-supplied seed money.

The association benefits members and the community. They help members do something they could not do before—borrow money to establish their own businesses. That has enabled them to play new roles in the community. One woman said she and most of her friends were reluctant to get involved at first because they could not see how it could work. Now, she said, most of the women in the village want to join because they see members selling products and earning money.

New organizations are also sprouting up in response to the government's decentralization of social services, such as community health and education. One example is a community health association established in the historic city of Djenne in 1994. The association operates a health center and outreach program for 15,000 residents of 20 villages. The association's priorities have been nutrition, water resources, hygiene education, and literacy training.

In response to demands for better education, citizens, NGOs, and businesses have established private schools in urban centers. In rural areas, as CDIE observed firsthand in Maniaga, NGOs have helped community groups create and operate hundreds of primary schools.

Obstacles and Problems

Lack of resources, bureaucratic resistance, land use issues, and popular attitudes and expectations are the primary obstacles to Mali's decentralization efforts.

Scarcity of Resources

Since their election in 1992, mayors of Mali's 19 urban communes have had to govern with inadequate financial resources. In separate meetings, several told CDIE they have little revenue but are expected to do a lot. They pointed out, for example, that as the first elected municipal chief executives, they were expected to repair property damage caused by the 1991 revolution and episodic civil unrest since then. Yet, one mayor said, the national government, fearful of prompting further unrest, stopped enforcing tax collection, leaving his municipality without its entitled revenue. This mayor wryly noted that citizens in his jurisdiction took advantage of their tax holiday while complaining about his failure to provide services.

Sikasso's road paving project has clearly succeeded in some respects, in the face of significant resource problems. For instance, working

with the city's major business owners, the mayor established financial requirements and negotiated private loans to complement funds raised from other sources. But officials in Bamako refused to sign off on the loans, ostensibly because the national government would be liable should the city default. The mayor, however, told CDIE he believes the denial was motivated by partisan politics, since he and most of his council are members of opposition parties.

When CDIE visited, work on the project had begun, but full financing was still not in place, despite years of persistent effort. Sikasso's experience has sobering implications for what other local governments will almost certainly face in their efforts to finance development. If Sikasso, the regional capital of Mali's wealthiest area, is unable to gather the resources to pave 18 kilometers, where does that leave rural communes in the poverty-stricken Sahelian and Saharan regions?

An official of the Mopti regional administration offered a stark illustration of the kind of dilemmas mayors of the 701 new communes will face. In his region there is a rural municipality of 10 villages with 15,000 inhabitants. From among them, the 5,000 who are taxpayers account for \$30,000 in municipal revenue. Taxes from other sources yield another \$10,000, making the budget \$40,000. Apart from day-to-day government expenses, the official noted, if the municipality simply wants to construct a three-classroom school, it would exceed its budget by \$2,000, because the going rate for one classroom is about \$14,000.

Bureaucratic Resistance

Bureaucratic opposition has impeded current decentralization efforts at all levels. From the onset, for example, the decentralization mission had to contend with obstructionist elements in its institutional parent, the Ministry of Territorial Affairs. To get out from under the ministry's control, the mission was relocated to the office

of the president and then to the office of the prime minister.¹⁰ While in the territorial affairs ministry, the mission tried to organize the local and regional study and mobilization groups through state administrators. This failed because the public does not respect or trust the administrators. However, when the mission tried again as part of the prime minister's office, it was successful because it could recruit respected members of local civil society.

State-appointed administrators also have obstructed commune mayors. More than one mayor told CDIE that Ministry of Territorial Affairs officials are uncooperative when it comes to certain police services.¹¹ The mayor of Sikasso said when he wanted to get a major neighborhood sanitation project started, the regional governor refused to authorize the money allocated on grounds that a minor technical requirement had not been met. Frustrated, the mayor turned to the Ministry of Transportation (since heavy trucks and other vehicles were involved) and quickly got the required approvals. The mayor then went back to the governor, who finally gave his authorization.

The effect of such attitudes, the mayor said, is an erosion of constituents' confidence in his ability to make good on his commitments. Had there been an election at the time, he thinks the project delays caused by the regional governor could have lost him his post.

Land Use

Land use is among the most complex and difficult decentralization issues. The mix of laws, traditional attitudes, and history has already caused problems and will probably continue to

do so once the new communes are up and running.

For example, because state officials rode roughshod over citizens' property claims in the past, the government committed to giving control of public land to locally elected officials. This includes state lands, which, under French law, embrace those the colonial regime judged "vacant and without master." There is considerable such land in urban areas, and with little or no revenue available and plots in great demand, mayors have given numerous land permits for houses and businesses. The problem, according to some observers, is that some mayors have evidently illegally enriched themselves and their clients through these land sales.

In addition, competition for useable land in rural areas is a problem that is likely to worsen as the population grows and resources shrink. NGO officials and villagers in the Mopti region described the situation local authorities there face. Known for its ethnic diversity, Mopti is regarded as "a Mali in miniature," with numerous groups competing for resources. According to the area's centuries-old land code, Dioro herders claim rights to all produce of the land, while Bozo fishermen have rights to all the fish in the Bani River. But because the months-long dry season reduces or eliminates fishing opportunities, the Bozo have begun planting irrigated truck gardens, surrounded by fences. Citing the land code, Dioro herders claim their cattle have the right to eat the Bozos' crops. The Bozo, of course, disagree, creating a potential for conflict new local authorities will find difficult to sort out.

Popular Attitudes and Expectations

Long-standing, widespread public skepticism and mistrust of the national government constitute formidable obstacles to decentralization. Many Malians remember the "decentralization reforms" of the 1970s under the Second Republic. Among them was a rural development tax which, people were told, would be returned to

¹⁰ After CDIE's visit, the decentralization mission was again placed in the Office of the President.

¹¹ The Ministry of Territorial Affairs assumed control of the police force during the Second Republic and continues to pay the salaries of its members serving in the communes.

localities for their use. This never happened, so talk of yet another round of decentralizing reforms elicits cynicism and even anger. As one villager put it, "The government takes us for fools, but we feel the same about them!"

Another obstacle is the "dependency reflex" that has evolved since independence and, most particularly, as an unintended consequence of massive donor assistance during the food shortages of the 1970s and 1980s. What it means for decentralization is that many people expect the central government to provide the resources communes will need when they become operational. If the government doesn't come through, several villagers mentioned in meetings with CDIE, they will look to international donors.

In effect, most Malians do not understand that decentralization means they must get by with their own resources and that local autonomy and self-sufficiency are linked. This is one of the reasons the mayor of Gao has made himself so visible by participating in public clean-ups. He is trying, he told CDIE, to create a "new reflex" among the people that will replace dependency with self-reliance.

Unanswered Questions

As a work very much in progress, Mali's decentralization effort is replete with unanswered questions. These go to the heart of the commune system and reorganized government structures at the cercle, region, and national levels.¹² And they go to the heart of the setting in which locally elected councils and mayors, central government bureaucrats, and communities will actualize their new roles, relationships, and responsibilities. As these questions are answered over time, they will define the evolution of de-

centralization to its fullest potential as a democratic undertaking.

The unanswered questions include:

■ *Will there be enough resources, financial and other, and will they be distributed equitably?* Inadequate resources have been a problem for all 19 urban communes. This augurs badly in the larger context. The economic viability of the new communes is questionable, and they will bear substantial added costs once they are up and running. For example, the government will need significantly more civil servants to represent its interests locally when the 270 existing local government units are superseded by the 701 new communes. Providing new local governments with essential training and technical support will be another expense.

Questions also arise over the distribution of resources in communes and across regions. For instance, Mali's northern regions, such as Gao and Timbuktu, are poorer than Sikasso in the south. They will be forced to operate with far less if they have to rely solely on their own resources. There are plans to use central funds to help poorer regions, but how they will be used is unclear.

Within communes, a major concern is that local elites will appropriate most of the power and resources, leaving most people no better off than before decentralization. Already, for example, some village chiefs have brought large amounts of land under their families' control. More broadly, there is the question of whether the village that becomes the commune seat of government will enjoy an unfair advantage over other villages.

■ *What will the relationship be between local authorities and the central government?* Mali's decentralization plan seeks to shift the balance of power and initiative from state administrators to locally elected officials. Nonetheless, ministries will continue to have representatives at the commune, cercle, and regional levels. In theory,

¹² The commune elections have been delayed. However, when CDIE was in Mali this had not yet become a problem. Some sources say the elections will take place during 1998, but no firm date has been set.

these state representatives, or “technical advisers” will maintain security, implement national policy, and supervise the communes, cercles, and regions. Whether they will live up to this job description or continue as their predecessors have, perpetuating state influence and stifling local autonomy, remains to be seen.

■ *What will the relationship be between villages and commune governments?* This question covers the distinct but interrelated relationships between traditional village leaders and commune authorities, villages and the commune seat of government, and village associations and commune authorities.

Traditional village chiefs have considerable legitimacy and their decisions typically represent public opinion, many Malians acknowledge. Their post may be hereditary, but chiefs are rarely autocrats and are more likely to build consensus and maintain village unity. Accordingly, the decentralization mission’s plan does not directly challenge their position and authority. One mission source pointed out that some local chiefs have survived all three Malian republics and he fully expects many to be strong players under the new commune arrangement. The question, then, is how chiefs will respond to and interact with elected commune officials. Will they or their kin be selected to run for commune council? Would that potentially make the mayor a creature of the traditional leadership system? If others outside a village’s “founding family” are elected, how might that affect the relationship between chiefs and commune authorities?

Villagers’ relationship with the new communes is framed by their strong sense of identification with their “home” village. Since the village continues to provide the order and framework for daily life, villages and communes will have to work out areas of jurisdiction and responsibility. The key question for villages is how they will interact with the new local authorities. What role will they play in electing the commune council? How pluralistic and open will

they be in this new role? Will they elect women and caste people? In effect, how successful will decentralization be in infusing the government’s commitment to local autonomy in grass-roots democratic activity?

In the case of community organizations, there appear to be many opportunities for them to work together with commune authorities. But elected councils will be new, untried, and insecure. Some council members might resent or fear local associations’ status and resources and work to inhibit their ability to achieve their objectives. Conversely, established local associations will have to adjust to sharing the public arena with new local authorities.

■ *How will the political process develop?* As of late 1997, decentralization had yet to reach the most important stage—election of commune councils and mayors. While it is widely believed that many of the more than 40 national political parties will move to establish a presence at the local level, little has happened to suggest how this will happen and the effects it will have. A host of difficult questions has yet to be resolved, including the electoral system to be used, whether religious parties can post candidates, and the viability of women and caste people as candidates.

■ *Can the country resolve outstanding legal issues?* The decentralization mission believes the basic laws are in place for decentralization, but numerous issues affecting its continued progress remain unresolved. For example, questions about land have long been the domain of the village chief’s family. The chief is viewed as an adjudicator of existing principles, on which he is widely regarded as the reigning expert. Even the most autocratic state agent is said to have opposed local chiefs on land questions at his peril. Decentralization laws, however, cede the central government’s rights over rural lands to the commune council and, thus, the mayor. This has prompted concern that mayors will threaten to displace the village chiefs in their traditional role.

Some observers believe the decentralization mission's decision to forgo the complex, time-consuming process of delineating the new communes' boundaries will cause problems. For example, decentralization law gives communes the right to manage resources within their territories. Without specified commune boundaries, it is unclear what will happen if a dispute arises over land claimed by two or more communes, or by residents of different villages in the same commune. Similarly, decentralization law states that village heads must be consulted when a commune activity involves its land. However, it is unclear what recourse villages have to oppose commune actions, since they have no legal standing under decentralization law.

THE ROLE OF USAID

Before the 1991 revolution, USAID/Mali's promotion of economic liberalization and localized health care laid groundwork that has facilitated the current decentralization effort. The health care system, decentralized in 1984-85, was the first sector to promote local planning and resource allocation. The Mission contributed directly to this transformation through its support of medical training and maternal and child health care programs.

USAID/Mali's promotion of an improved food security system after the 1984 drought and the government's introduction of free market incentives in agriculture figured prominently in the effort of the late 1980s to address the country's serious economic problems. Because this reduced the state's economic role before the

present government was in place in 1991, severe economic dislocation that might have undermined the democratic transition was averted. From these efforts, rural Malians also got a head start in creating their own market networks, easing the transition to self-sufficiency.

Since 1991, USAID/Mali has fully supported decentralization. The Mission, for example, provided \$60,000 to support the formation and operation of the local and regional study and mobilization groups in Kayes, Segou, and Sikasso. In 1993 and 1994, using \$200,000 of Human Resources Development Assistance project funds, the Mission collaborated with the Ministry of Territorial Affairs in organizing training seminars on mobilizing local financial resources. One, in Sikasso, drew more than 60 elected representatives, administration officials, business owners, and others. (The Sikasso seminar was the catalyst for the road-paving project.)

In line with current strategic objectives, the Mission has put considerable resources into strengthening local institutional capacity and democratic governance. One successful effort has been the Urban Revitalization project, designed and administered by the U.S. PVO, World Education. The project started at a time of civil unrest and initially supported NGO efforts to get unemployed urban youths involved in productive activities, such as neighborhood garbage collection. Its focus has since broadened to include many more NGOs and activities.

The Urban Revitalization project was one of the first to use a PVO-NGO-neighborhood model. Under this model, World Education has worked with more than two dozen Malian NGOs. These, in turn, work with neighborhood groups responsible for helping communities plan and implement activities. At each level—PVO, NGO, and neighborhood—capacities are strengthened and local people begin to see, often for the first time, the concrete results achievable through self-governance.¹³

¹³ NGO partners are selected according to basic criteria, receive a 10 percent management fee to cover administrative costs, and are responsible for liaison with local government authorities. At the neighborhood level, people discuss local priorities and how to spend funds at public meetings. Neighborhoods are expected to establish a voluntary committee of 10 to 15 residents to supervise community activities and monitor the use of grant funds.

The Mission has adapted and used this PVO-NGO neighborhood model, in other programs, including the Mission's basic education programs, which are important democratic decentralization activities. The Mission stepped into the vacuum to promote parent-funded and -managed primary schools. Through PVOs such as World Vision, Care, and Save The Children, the Mission has promoted community schools. This benefits students and teachers while giving parents invaluable self-governance experience through their involvement with school operations and management. The Mission has also helped with teacher training.

The Mission has helped the Ministry of Education—among the most centralized, top-down of government agencies—reorganize to promote decentralization and local autonomy. As a result, the ministry has created a legal framework permitting innovative approaches to schooling, including literacy in the nation's principal languages.

USAID/Mali has also worked to bolster civil society in villages and improved networks between villages.¹⁴ For example, Mission-supported NGOs have helped village associations carry out cooperative enterprises with other villages. In Safebougoula, near Bamako, a village association trained by an offshoot of the U.S. National Cooperative Business Association started to buy fertilizer in bulk for all the villages in the district. This prompted inter-village cooperation in other transactions, such as selling surplus production.

The Mission and the U.S. Information Agency have jointly supported efforts to promote civic education through media development. Newspapers and newsletters have proliferated since the government loosened press restrictions af-

ter the 1991 coup. Some of these new enterprises have stayed afloat because of the USAID-USIA supported training for journalists, technical support, and financial management training.

Seventy-seven private rural radio stations, a first in West Africa, are among the most promising Mission-supported civic education innovations. Broadcasting in local languages, these stations promote public awareness and understanding of social, economic, and political issues, such as the role of women, agricultural markets, and decentralization. In Douenza, for example, local radio announcers told CDIE that in the public debate on forming their area's commune they invited resource people to talk on the air about this issue.

THE ROLE OF OTHER DONORS

Donors including Canada, the European Union, France, Germany, Netherlands, Switzerland, and the United Nations have played a vitally important role in the current decentralization effort. Since 1993 these donors have committed more than \$6 million for decentralization through a cooperative arrangement with the decentralization mission, whereby they provide assistance for a given function. For instance, Canada and Germany helped fund the commune redistricting process.

The decentralization mission has also used these funds administratively to help cover consultant fees, staff salaries, and office furnishings and equipment. In the program area, the funding has supported efforts to inform and educate people about decentralization and establish the legal and institutional framework for the commune system.

After the commune elections, these donors are expected to continue to play a vital role by providing assistance for the necessary extensive training for new local officials and ministry representatives at the commune, cercle, and regional

¹⁴ Strengthening civil society in support of the decentralization process is the primary focus of the Mission's new five-year \$17.2 million democratic governance strategic objective.

levels. Under the decentralization mission's direction, donors will also continue to support civic education efforts to expand capacity for local autonomy and democratic governance.

SUMMING UP

Mali's leaders have seized the opportunity of the 1991 government overthrow to embark on political reform through democratic decentralization. The government's initiative is fueled by the knowledge that continuing the hyper-centralized, authoritarian system the French instituted in the 1890s would lead to widespread unrest and fragmentation. The essence of the reform lies in revitalizing and empowering cities and villages through a new system of government built on fiscal autonomy, citizen participation, and democratic representation.

The Mission for Decentralization, the moving force behind this ambitious undertaking, has developed the government's plan in a committed, thoughtful, and measured manner. Using participatory planning, the mission opened up redistricting to the localities and worked to educate people about local self-governance. In addition, the mission has successfully developed the legal and institutional framework to implement its decentralization plan.

Less encouraging has been the decentralization experience of the 19 cities granted limited autonomy under the previous regime. Elected in 1992, the mayors of these cities have had to confront the responsibilities of decentralization amidst widespread public skepticism and distrust, under muddy institutional arrangements, and with limited resources. They have ventured into the decentralization arena with mixed results. Some, such as the mayors of Sikasso and Gao, have tackled their jobs with entrepreneurial fervor, sometimes risking citizens' ire. Others, due to inertia or failed initiatives, face electorates eager to use their new political power to "throw the bums out."

On balance, Mali's experiment in decentralization is replete with promise and challenges. On the one hand, the decentralization mission has succeeded admirably in actualizing and spreading the National Conference's mandate that localities "be their own masters." As a result, Malians are eager to take charge of their futures in ways never before possible.

On the other hand, there are many obstacles, problems, and unanswered questions. While many are optimistic about the new scheme of local government, many look for external support to dull the pain of self-sufficiency. Despite optimism about the potential to raise local revenues, new local officials are likely to face an unsupportive mix of extremely poor and mistrustful taxpayers with outlooks framed by the abuses of the authoritarian past.

LESSONS LEARNED

1. Capitalize on government commitment. Among the most striking features of Mali's decentralization effort is the government's steadfast commitment and support. Mali's leaders, deeply influenced by the 1991 revolt, subsequent National Conference, and Tuareg and Moor rebellion in the north, see decentralization as a matter of political necessity. As a result, for example, they reacted decisively to early bureaucratic resistance by moving the decentralization mission from the Ministry of Territorial Affairs to the president's office. In effect, from the outset, political will has been intrinsic to Mali's current decentralization effort and, as such, remains perhaps the single most important factor for its continued success.

2. Support creation of an independent decentralization office. The Mission for Decentralization has been the driving force behind Mali's decentralization program. Without its efforts to implement the decentralization plan, promising developments would surely have been fewer and harder in coming. The mission's suc-

cess underscores the importance of a strong, independent institution in charge of decentralization, under the direct supervision of the country's president or prime minister.

3. Get the word out and involve the people.

The degree to which people became informed about the decentralization program and participated actively in its implementation are, without a doubt, among the program's most impressive achievements. Through the regional and local study and mobilization groups, the decentralization mission instituted a nationwide public education campaign about the program. Building on that effort, the mission directly involved the people in organizing their new local government units. These activities helped make Malians everywhere stakeholders in decentralization. Equally important, they prompted an unprecedented dialog between government and governed, which promises to improve a long-standing antagonistic relationship and promote the mutual trust essential for decentralization's success.

4. Mobilize local leaders as "credible messengers." Mali's regional and local study groups underscore the importance local leaders can play in promoting citizen participation. Decentralization mission officials initially worried that tough questions would trigger open conflict. However they quickly discovered that local leaders could be their strongest allies. At local and regional group meetings, they found local speakers could calm tempers and refocus discussions in ways that would have been difficult for central government bureaucrats.

Given public skepticism about government, regional and local group members' explanation of and support for decentralization played a major part in giving it credibility among many Malians.

5. Use local media to promote public awareness and involvement. In Mali, an extremely poor country with widespread illiteracy, dozens of private local radio stations are playing an important role, informing the public about decentralization and serving as vehicles for groups traditionally excluded from the political arena, such as women, to be heard.

6. Build on prior assistance activities. USAID and other donors have long been involved in supporting local development. In areas such as health, education, and natural resources management, this has created a legacy of experience and functional local organizations able to play an important role in decentralization efforts. USAID/Mali has underscored its awareness of this by supporting civil society groups in its new democratic governance strategic objective.

7. Take advantage of the cultural context. Mali's cultural heritage offers numerous opportunities for decentralization. Villages, for example, have a rich associational life and strong interpersonal networks that have long served as a means to mobilize resources. There is also strong social pressure to work together for a valued collective purpose. Thus, although villagers have long concealed taxable property from the state, many Malians believe this can change with full local self-government.

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